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ABSTRACT

Based on the results of a research project and on the conviction that functional speech communication behaviors must be developed in children, this paper proposes several directions for the effective development of speech communication instruction in schools. The research project consisted of three phases: input, synthesis, and implementation. The input phase included a review of pertinent literature on the cognitive, social, and communication development of children, a behavioral study of children's competencies and attitudes in various communication settings, and an assessment of the attitudes of speech communication teachers regarding the development of goals for classroom instruction. The synthesis phase was a working conference that reviewed the input data and identified five large families of communication functions that include controlling, feeling, informing, ritualizing, and imagining. The implementation phase of the project translated the synthesis of data into a sample curriculum for elementary and secondary teachers that is centered on teaching the functional communication competencies. Questions for future research are included. (MAI)

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FUNCTIONAL COMMUNICATION IN CHILDREN: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

by

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PURPOSE

In this paper I am reporting on the results of research conducted by the National Project on Speech Communication Competence. The Project was originated and sponsored by the Speech Communication Association with the support of a grant from the Axe-Houghton Foundation. A full report of the Project is contained in the book, Developing Communication Competence in Children, published by the National Textbook Corporation and available from the publisher or from the Speech Communication Association, and in two ERIC TRIP booklets, Development of Functional Communication Competencies: Pre-K-6 and 7-12.

Impetus for the Project was provided by two convictions widely held by speech communication scholars and educators: (1) that functional speech communication behaviors are of such crucial significance that they must be emphasized progressively and continuously throughout the school experience; and (2) that our nation's schools have largely ignored the functional communication needs of children and youth. The purpose of the project was to identify the most fruitful directions for the development of speech communication instruction in the schools.

METHODOLOGY

The Project consisted of three phases: input, synthesis, and implementation.

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The Input Phase, which began in the Fall of 1973, consisted of three related lines of inquiry: (1) a review of pertinent literature on the cognitive, social, and communication development of children; (2) a behavioral study of children's competencies and attitudes in various communication settings, and (3) an assessment of the attitudes of speech communication teachers and subject matter experts regarding the goal of speech communication instruction in the schools.

The Synthesis Phase, which took the form of a working conference, involved the sifting and winnowing of Input Phase data to arrive at a perspective that may guide the development of instructional programs in speech communication.

The Implementation Phase translates our synthesis of data into a sample curriculum for K-12 teachers. The curriculum is centered around teaching functional communication competencies.

Before I report the outcomes of the project I want to describe more fully the nature of the Input Phase. The literature survey reviewed over 1,000 investigations of the development of the language code and of the development of uses of language in thinking, feeling, and interacting. The intent was to study the development of language in the context of human interaction in interpersonal situations. The literature is reviewed under four categories: (1) Code Learning (i.e., phonology, syntax, and semantics); (2) Learning of Communication Roles and Norms; (3) Affective Learning; and (4) Applied Communication (i.e., learning to communicate in interpersonal situations as reflected in research on the development of interaction strategies, role-taking, play, referential communication, thinking and reasoning, and persuasability). Studies of intervention programs and of the classroom as a context for promoting or retarding communication development were an important part of this review. Each of the categories was investigated and reviewed independently at first, and then all four categories were synthesized. The synthesis resulted in a chart that summarizes major findings of communication development

and a list of communication behaviors, pre-K through adolescence. The chart cites characteristics of development and supporting literature for each age span (pre-K through 12) under five of the headings: development of nonverbal communication codes; development of verbal communication codes; cultural and other influences upon development; development of how the code is used; and implications for instruction. The list of behaviors represents a translation of research findings into age-appropriate competencies that can be further transformed into instructional objectives.

The literature survey showed that there are noticeable gaps in knowledge of communication development, that there is little information regarding measures that are sensitive to functional communication development in children, and most important, that there is limited information on how children adapt to various communication contexts. Therefore, a field study was done to assess children's communication competence with respect to significant functions performed in a variety of contexts. The study involved 360 children from Chicago and Stevens Point and Appleton, Wisconsin. Cross sectional in design, the study involved children, aged 5-15, in interview situations about communication in everyday encounters. The interviews were structured around three major attributes: the function of communication employed in the situation, the significant other person within the situation, and the perspective taken within the situation. Pictures and verbal probes were used as stimuli to elicit the children's attitudes about communication and their skills within communication situations. In short, the field study sought to determine developmental trends regarding how children perform with respect to purpose, people and perspective.

While the literature survey and the field study offer data on what children can do, the Questionnaire Study focused on what children should be able to do. By using a variation of the Delphi Technique this study asked approximately 100

subject matter experts in higher education and elementary and secondary teachers of speech communication to identify critical communication competencies for kindergarten through twelfth grade children. The Questionnaire Study sought to determine age-appropriate goals of instruction. Approximately 327 objectives were identified; 35 of these occurred most frequently and were designated as core objectives. They demonstrate that teachers can reach reasonable consensus on critical communication competencies that students should possess. Moreover, a majority of the core objectives cut across four levels of communication -- two person, small group, one-to-many, and mass communication -- and emphasize competencies that are adaptive, that require one to meet the demands of the social situation.

SELECTED FINDINGS

Armed with a great deal of data from the literature survey, the field study, and the questionnaire study, the nine project investigators and two members from the SCA national office, set about to synthesize the data in a working conference. This Synthesis Phase resulted in five working assumptions about communication instruction, a definition of the aspects of communication competence, and identification of five functional communication categories for instruction.

Working Assumptions About Communication Instruction

The focus of communication instruction in the total development of children and youth may be clarified by five assumptions:

(1) Communication educators are primarily interested in the pragmatics of communication.

(2) Communication competency is not tied to competency in a particular form of language.

(3) Communication behaviors of children can be modified.

(4) Communication educators should be child-centered in their educational prescriptions.

(5) Communication instruction should emphasize the interactive nature of communication.

Definition of Communication Competence

Communication competence involves an awareness of the transactions that occur between people. Competence, in this perspective, is tied to the actual performance of language in social contexts. Viewed in this way competence is characterized by four principal features. We call these Repertoire, Selection, Implementation, Evaluation. (1) The exercise of competence depends upon an available repertoire of experiences. To be flexible communicators, children must be capable of performing a wide range of communication acts required by their social environment. (2) The exercise of competence requires that the individual make critical choices from that repertoire. Taking into consideration the relevant characteristics of the communication context -- participants, topic, task, setting, and preceding events -- children select from their repertoire of strategies those which they perceive to be the most appropriate for the specific situation at a given moment in time. (3) The exercise of competence is revealed when suitable behaviors are brought to bear in performing desired tasks. Having determined a strategy to use in a given communication context, children must be willing to carry that strategy into action. Through implementation, children experience themselves using verbal and nonverbal behaviors designed to accomplish a given intent. (4) Competence is sustained when individuals are able to evaluate their performance behaviors objectively. Having performed a communication act, children must evaluate their communication behavior in terms of its appropriateness to the communication context and its interpersonal effectiveness -- that is, satisfaction to the child and to others. Each of these four features

provides a way of viewing the development of communication competence and focuses our attention, pedagogically, on different kinds of instructional intervention.

Functional Communication Categories for Instruction

In the Synthesis Phase we noted that children must be capable of performing a wide range of communication acts (i.e., purposes, functions, contexts). But around what acts or functions should communication instruction be organized? Any classification of functions is necessarily arbitrary, but given the data from the Input Phase, the Project staff identified five large families of functions which embrace, we feel, the dominant uses of communication in contemporary life:

(1) Controlling - these are acts in which the participants' dominant purpose is to control behavior -- commanding, offering, suggesting, permitting, etc.

(2) Feeling - these are acts in which the participants' dominant purpose is to express feelings and attitudes as an affective response -- taunting, commiserating, tale-telling, expressing a state or an attitude.

(3) Informing - these are acts in which the participants' purpose is to offer or seek information -- behaviors such as stating pieces of information, questioning, answering, justifying, naming, explaining, etc.

(4) Ritualizing - these are acts that serve primarily to maintain social relationships and to facilitate social interaction -- acts such as greeting, taking leave, playing verbal games, taking turns in conversation, etc.

(5) Imagining - these are acts that cast the participants in imaginary situations -- role-playing, fantasizing, speculating, dramatizing and theorizing, etc.

Between our definition of communication competence and of these five functions, this research provides a framework teachers may use in designing appropriate instructional experiences.

Many teachers want to provide communication experiences for their students but

lack direction. The four features of competence are operative in every moment of communication, but they provide a different focus for viewing the development of children's communicative competence -- each focuses attention, pedagogically, on different kinds of instructional intervention. The five families of communication functions provide an organizing principle for instruction on the strength of the belief that such functions are the overriding dimension of communication. Both young children and adults perform these acts in all functional situations with varying degrees of effectiveness. The instructional task is to determine what communication acts children can use effectively and to allow children opportunities for practicing these acts while they are learning others.

To summarize our findings we are saying that instruction that seeks to develop communication competence in children is instruction that: (1) Features the pragmatics of communication; (2) Develops knowledge of how the child develops as a communicator; (3) Plans child-centered intervention strategies aimed at developing presumably desirable communication behaviors; (4) Emphasizes the interactive nature of communication; (5) Views competence as tied to actual performance of language in social contexts; (6) Provides a framework teachers may use in designing instructional experiences, e.g., competence features and communication functions; and (7) Sensitizes the teacher to the communication dimensions of classrooms.

But more research needs to be done. The definition of communication competence provided by the Project staff identifies relatively precise kinds of communication behaviors that deserve the attention of communication researchers. We need to chart the course and schedule of development of functional communication behaviors What is the range of strategic choices made by children at various stages of development? How effective are children in implementing their strategic choices? How effective are students in evaluating the communication encounters that they

have experienced? To what extent do children function effectively in performing diverse kinds of acts in diverse communication settings at different developmental stages?

We must also assess the impact of instructional intervention upon communication development. What instructional sequence, if any, is most effective in achieving particular goals? How can transfer of learning to different situations be effected? What conditions facilitate continued improvement after instruction is terminated? How can we evaluate competence and the effects of intervention on it? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed in the future.

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